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My life in the CIA file

JONATHAN MIRSKY suggests how Reagan's (anti-public expenditure) government might use the CIA against its opponents

THE CIA has always been a broad church. It contracted with the Mafia to assassinate Fidel Castro and ran an opium-producing private army in Laos. It also ferreted out, but withheld from me on national security grounds, that my mother was a musician and author.

And now, if Ronald Reagan gets his way, for the first time since its founding in 1947 the CIA will be permitted to spy legally on American citizens, a pursuit prohibited in the 1947 National Security Act which states: 'the Agency shall have no police, subpoena, law enforcement or internal security functions.' For years the Agency ignored this prohibition and kept thousands of domestic files.

Why did this vast organisation, busy with murders, destabilisations, and military responsibilities around the world, bother to break the law at home? The 1975 Rockefeller Commission on the CIA explained: 'Continuing anti-war demonstrations from 1968 led to growing White House demands for greater coverage of such groups' activities abroad.'

Although the CIA itself assured him it was not true, President Nixon felt certain that gold from Moscow, Peking, Hanoi and Havana sustained the protesters. The President therefore ordered the CIA to establish the Special Operations Group, which sheltered behind the cryptonym 'CHAOS'.

From 300,000 names in the CHAOS computer index, 7,200 'personality files' were 'developed'. According to the Rockefeller report:

Even the staff of the CIA's Inspector General were precluded from reviewing the CHAOS file . . . It is safe to say that CIA's top leadership wished to avoid even the appearance of participating in internal security matters and were cognisant that . . . CHAOS would generate adverse public reaction if revealed.

CHAOS was 'terminated' (as the CIA used to say of successful assassinations) in 1974.

I WAS ONE of its 7,200 'personalities'. As the dossier shows I had been a good soldier in the anti-war movement since 1963, when a group of my students at the University of Pennsylvania invited me to stand on a grapefruit box and deliver a US-out-of-Vietnam talk to seven spectators. Thereafter I wrote articles and books about Vietnam, went to Indochina twice, and to jail three times, once for a week after sitting under a bus-full of draftees. At the Spock trial I testified 65 seconds for the defence.

During this time I continued to teach my university classes, sit on academic committees, publish scholarly articles on 8th-century China, eat most of my dinners at home, and make appointments for polite disagreements in the White House, Senate, and even the CIA.

These facts, and sensations like my mother's occupations, emerged from my CIA, FBI, Navy, Army and Defense Department files, which I obtained in 1975 and 1976 under the Freedom of Information Act. The cost of such extensive surveillance, if paid for by anyone other than the taxpayer, would have broken a substantial bank account and floated a private detective agency forever.

My conservative Vermont Senator, also a believer in free speech, prodded CIA Director William Colby to hand over my file. Colby maintained that my allegations of 'a massive illegal domestic intelligence operation were totally false'. This assertion was revealed as a lie when Nixon resigned and the Rockefeller Commission emptied a lot of dirt onto the table.

I then engaged in a postal duel with the CIA's 'Freedom of Information Coordinator', who finally conceded that 'we do have certain information believed to be identifiable to you', and months later disgorged my heavily-deleted file in a thick brown envelope which proclaimed the CIA to be an Equal Opportunity Employer.

The file naturally includes my three years spent as an English teacher in Taiwan for the Asia Foundation. I say 'naturally' because unknown to me at the time the Foundation was a CIA front. This may explain why the words 'Asia Foundation' were excised from the file, in the hope, I suppose, that I might have forgotten who I worked for.

CIA JUDGMENTS about me during the anti-war movement were not always flattering. In one 'priority security check' I am merely 'fairly knowledgeable on Communist China and North Vietnam'. In 'Director Cable 62520' I am 'anti-us vis-a-vis Vietnam' which I later realised must mean 'anti-US'. Much energy went into reproducing dozens of my speeches to Quaker meetings, Rotarians and colleges.

What was never 'granted' was the name of the efficient person in my hometown, Thetford, Vermont, pop. 57, who annually reported that my wife and I were good citizens. 'Granting' me that name, said the chairman of the CIA's Information Review Committee, 'would reveal investigative techniques and procedures'.

Such sensitivity started at the very top. When the first CHAOS report was delivered to Henry Kissinger by the Agency's then director, Richard Helms, he cautioned: 'Should anyone learn of CHAOS's existence it would prove most embarrassing to all concerned'.

There is no suggestion anywhere in this mountain of documents that my country suspected me of illegal activities. What attracted the spies, according to the Freedom of Information Coordinator, were my 'views, travels, and speeches'. In one document, a Mr. Ober, whose name was mistakenly not deleted, asks for a check on 'subject' (later revealed to be me). Mr Ober was the head of CHAOS.

Last week, the Congressional subcommittee endeavouring to explore the White House plans to unshackle the CIA from the 1947 prohibition on domestic spying was forced to shut up shop after half an hour. The committee's chairman, Congressman Don Edwards of California, said: 'The public is entitled to know that pressure has been placed on this committee to withdraw from the debate and that prospective witnesses have been pressured not to appear.'